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THE LATE DR. A. B. DAVIDSON AS PREACHER AND ESSAYIST¹

PROFESSOR W. G. JORDAN, B.A., D.D.
Queen's University, Kingston, Canada

Dr. Davidson lived and worked during a period when biblical criticism made great advances both as to point of view and results; or, in other words, a time when the work of previous generations was beginning to exercise a powerful influence on the student of Scripture. He was quite well acquainted with what was going on in his own field, but was afraid of overhasty movement, and was content to move slowly from stage to stage. He seems in many cases to have stimulated his students more by suggestion than by actual statement. The result is seen in the two volumes on Old Testament prophecy and Old Testament theology that have appeared since his death. It is not likely that their author would ever have published the lectures contained in those two volumes in their present form, as they give us, not the final, finished treatment for which he longed, but a series of efforts in which the old and the new appear side by side, waiting for fuller harmony.

Considering the three volumes now before us as a whole, we feel something of the same impression; but in this case each sermon or essay can be regarded as a separate and completed product, expressing the fragment of truth suited to the particular circumstances.

Let us deal, then, briefly with the essays first, reserving the greater part of our article for a study of the preacher. Dr. Davidson had all the qualities necessary for a great essayist: thoroughness of information, clearness of thought, beauty of expression. These three essential powers he shows in many various ways by his lucid definiteness, his fine discriminations, striking contrasts, and apt illustrations. Where the subject admits of clear, simple treatment, Dr. Davidson's essays reach a condition of clearness, strength, and beauty that is well-nigh perfect. The essay on "Arabic Poetry" (p. 254) is an illustration of this. Here the subject is unfolded step by step, gaining in lucidity and force until it reaches an

¹ *Biblical and Literary Essays*. By the late A. B. Davidson, D.D., LL.D., Litt.D., Professor of Hebrew, New College, Edinburgh. New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1902. Pp. ix+320. \$1.75.

The Called of God, pp. 336; \$2. *Waiting upon God*, pp. ix+378; \$2.50. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902.

appropriate and convincing close. In its general arrangement as well as in its minute details this essay is marked by masterly strength and simplicity.

It could certainly never be said of any of his essays, in words which he is reported to have used in criticising a student, that "half might be left out, and it did not matter which half." As a rule, the student may take these essays as models of clear, sober, well-balanced statement, furnished with arguments that are forceful and illustrations that are luminous. Of course, there is abundant room for discussion in the topics treated and opinions expressed; e. g., on such points as that of translation, where Dr. Davidson says: "Our American brethren perform the most curious antics here" (p. 219); or even in the expositions, as, for instance, that of the second psalm, where those who maintain that "thou shalt break them with a rod of iron" is below the Christian ideal, are said to be "too Christian in their sentiments;" and Rev. 12:5; Luke 19:27 are quoted in support of this judgment. These are only specimens of details in exposition about which there must always be room for difference of opinion.

Such things do not lead us to question the strong statement made by Professor Paterson:

To the accuracy and taste of a finished linguist, Professor Davidson added the deep insight of a philosophic thinker and the spiritual intensity of a large-hearted Christian.²

But we are compelled to note that, so far as we can gather from these essays, the "philosophy" was not in all cases thoroughly applied to the interpretation of history. For example, of the Old Testament apocrypha it is said:

It is not biblical. It has no historic place in the Jewish canon. Certainly in these days it has tremendous interest. It comes to us as the only utterances out of that dark night which came down upon the Jewish church when it slept for four hundred years, and awoke, and arose, and found itself Christian.³

No one will now maintain that this sentence does anything like justice to one of the most important periods in the history of the world, when the Jewish church fought for its very life, and the conflict of Hebrew with Hellenic modes of thought prepared the way for a new intellectual and spiritual world. But does it even harmonize with the teaching of the next paragraph in which we are told that "in God's procedure there came no sudden starts. Imperfection orbs slowly into perfection;" and where we are warned rather than invited to study this great period, just because our ears are vexed with "origins" and "antecedents"?

² Preface, p. viii.

³ *Essays*, p. 4.

We may be reminded that the form of many of these statements would have been changed had Dr. Davidson lived to revise them himself. That is quite probable, and it constitutes a difficulty for the reviewer. Dr. Davidson's mind, as we see from other passages, was of the judicial type. When he reviewed a new book by an "advanced critic," he was very keen to see the weaknesses and excesses in the presentation of the case, but at the same time the strong points were, if not eagerly accepted, slowly acknowledged. Hence outsiders were often surprised to discover that a man so conservative in temper had advanced so far along a particular path. As an illustration, consider carefully the analysis of the book of Isaiah given in the "Temple Bible" edition.

In the "Biographical Introduction" (p. 41) of *The Called of God*, we read: "Davidson was a preacher *malgré lui*." With almost as much truth it might be said that he was a philosopher in spite of himself. We all admire his philosophic gifts, but we are not surprised to read that "his distrust of philosophy and its methods lasted to the end, and was often sarcastically expressed." Would it be unfair to call the man who indited the following passage a critic in spite of himself?

May we not hope that criticism will have its day, and that some of us may live to see it as much a matter of the past as some of the subtle doctrinal discussions of the Middle Ages or the seventeenth century? Will the time not come when men will care little who was the author of documents, when the question asked will not be, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas was the author of an epistle, but whether the epistle contains sound advice?⁴

Certainly, the general truth he is enforcing is clear enough, that "the pedantry of exact scholarship" may injuriously affect a translation. But, surely, we do not sigh to be rid of criticism, if it is such a process as is indicated in the definition found in *Biblical and Literary Essays* (p. 320):

Criticism is the effort of exegesis to be historical. The effort can never be more than partially successful. But though there may be many failures, the idea of historical exegesis is valuable because it gives us the right idea of Scripture which is the reflection of the presence of the living God in human history.

And the thoughtful Bible student only wishes to have these questions of authorship and date answered because he expects through such answers to have light cast upon the documents. Does not the real life of prophetic teaching and the sound advice of an epistle appear in a clearer light when we understand the historical circumstances in which they had their origin?

Speaking upon the question whether the great sermon beginning with Isa., chap. 40, was written almost two centuries before it was needed,

⁴ *Essays*, p. 218.

Dr. Davidson declared: "That is a question, however, which does not in the least affect the meaning of the prophecies."⁵ The fact is that Professor Davidson did regard such questions as important in their own place, but he would not yield them the supreme place that some claimed for them. This was his temperament right through. He always saw the two or more sides of a question, and he was anxious to do full justice to any view, but at the same time to limit and qualify it so that it should not run to "the falsehood of extremes."

This quality comes out in his sermons, and gives rise to many a thoughtful, carefully balanced statement, of which we can quote only one or two:

It is not always easy to say whether silence on religious subjects be a good sign or a bad. If you cannot draw a man into conversation at all on these things, there must be something wrong. Yet too ready speech may be only a proof of a shallow mind that is too superficial to feel the hollowness of speaking about that of which it has no experience.⁶

The popular preacher, even at his best, seizes a fragment of truth and presses it home with impetuous zeal, allowing in the meantime other aspects of truth to take care of themselves. That is a needful kind of service, and if Dr. Davidson had been called to the regular ministry, probably his preaching might have been modified in this direction by the pressure of actual circumstances. Surely, we are justified in thinking thus when we find in these occasional sermons all the qualities that go to make up the most effective kind of preaching: good homiletic arrangement, cogent argument, vivid imagination, poetic expression which at times takes on a little rhetorical exaggeration, and, above all, keen sympathy with the spiritual needs and struggles of men. He seems to settle this matter himself, when he says:

The rationale of the preacher is that he is a man. His position as a member of that unity, the human race, accounts for his declaring the "Good Tidings" to them. The gospel quickens the feelings arising out of this position.⁷

He was certainly a man who felt the pressure of life's mystery, who hungered for the revelation of God, and who was, moreover, gifted with noble powers as an interpreter and expositor. His work was to be a teacher and guide of preachers, and in that line he had a very rich, full career.

⁵ *Waiting on God*, p. 4. On p. 357 of the same volume we have the more correct statement that "the prophets all stand amidst the circumstances of human life and the conditions of the world surrounding them in their own day. It is these that they survey."

⁶ *Waiting on God*, p. 72; see also *The Called of God*, pp. 94, 223, 305.

⁷ *Essays*, p. 292.

The sermons that are here given are of the kind that the church needs, in that they are thoroughly exegetical and expository in the best sense; and because of this they abound in thoughtful suggestions which are strictly applicable to the religious life of our own time. One quotation from this class of passages must be allowed:

Hence the helps which weak faith tries sometimes to create for itself in the shape of tents, retreats, religious conferences, withdrawals from public life, and other appliances. These things are a confession that faith is weak and struggling for existence. They are like the stimulants administered to one that is sick, in order to keep up the vitality. One in robust health does not need them. And they are useful only on the first or second occasion on which they are tried, but positively mischievous when resorted to habitually. For, in addition to their making religion depend on these stimulants, one observes that such conferences continually tend to decline; and the world gets hold of them, and infuses its own spirit into them; and they become mere gatherings of what is called, with unconscious sarcasm, the religious world; and are stages on which the love of pre-eminence and the other passions of human nature play their part, with as little disguise as they do on mere secular platforms.⁸

Many other passages might be quoted or references given showing originality of treatment, subtlety of analysis, vivid description of passion or conduct, and a habit of dwelling upon the neglected or unsuspected aspect of a subject; but for these we must refer the student to the discourses themselves, and especially to the biographical sermons in the volume entitled *The Called of God*.

One word must be said in conclusion, and in saying this word we would not like to incur the reproach of ungraciously complaining because the life of a great man was not different in its character and tone. We are thankful for the life as it was, and appreciate the service rendered as one of God's great gifts to our generation; but our subject is scarcely finished unless we point out that Dr. Davidson's sermons do not contribute very much to illuminate the question of how far and in what way the results of modern criticism can be applied to preaching on Old Testament subjects. In the volume *Waiting upon God*, out of the fifteen sermons only four are on Old Testament themes. Of these four, one treats Ps. 51 from the point of view of the Davidic authorship; the other three are masterly expositions based upon the most recent scholarship. In *The Called of God* eight out of thirteen sermons are subjects chosen from the Old Testament. The two remarkable discourses on "Saul's Reprobation" and "Elijah's Flight" are among the noblest specimens of Dr. Davidson's preaching gift. In several of these discourses we see the Old Testament specialist bringing

⁸ *The Called of God*, p. 69.

out of his treasury things new and old for the edification of the church, and we are glad to have one more proof that technical scholarship need not unfit a man for public teaching. At present many are asking: What effect is criticism likely to have upon preaching? Suppose the views presented in the latest critical commentaries are in the main correct, in what way must the preacher now handle the Old Testament histories so as to be frank with his hearers, do justice to his own "exegetical conscience," and bring out powerfully the permanent spiritual truths? That question must be faced by those whose business it is to give sane and helpful guidance to young preachers. A man of Dr. Davidson's abilities could have made a valuable contribution toward its settlement, and he does approach the subject in the essay on "The Uses of the Old Testament for Edification;" but what he is mainly concerned with there is to show that criticism has not touched "the doctrines of the faith." A preacher may be convinced that the fundamental truths on which the spiritual life rests are unshaken, and yet may be perplexed as to the best way of using for edification the stories in which the faith of the Hebrew people is embodied. Each generation of preachers must face its own questions, and while we give thanks for the great gifts of the men who are gone, we may cherish the faith that to devout, diligent students there will be given increasing light in the attempt to make the record of God's past dealings available for the church of our own time. But, in order to do this, we must surely believe that in the realm of criticism also there is no real loss; if the new view is true, then it is for us better than the old, not only more correct, but also more useful. Suppose, for the sake of illustration, that Isa., chap. 40, is a product of the Exile period, and that Ps. 51 is by a poet of the same or a later time. It must be important for the preacher to understand this, as the best preparation for vivid exposition is the preacher's own realization of the circumstance that gave meaning and appropriateness to these great utterances. One can only regret that some of the statements found in these volumes tend to obscure the professor's own great saying, that criticism is the effort of exegesis to become historical, and by becoming historical to find the ways of God in the life of man.